Rules of the Game
Two-Handed Fighting (Part One)
By Skip Williams

D&D characters tend to spend a great deal of time fighting. Even characters who strive to be placid and diplomatic eventually find it necessary to come to blows with a foe now and then -- unless they're willing to flee or simply become monster snacks.

The game offers characters numerous ways to spruce up their fighting styles. Perhaps the most accessible martial flourish is fighting with both hands using either a two-handed weapon or a weapon in each hand. Anyone who can afford the requisite equipment can fight this way.

Unfortunately, two-handed fighting carries a few disadvantages, and doing it well often requires a bigger investment than buying a weapon or two. Some two-handed fighting options also can plunge a character into a morass of combat modifiers and obscure combat rules. This series examines two-handed fighting in detail and seeks to smooth out some of the rules tangles that await two-handed combatants.

Some Key Terms

Here's a brief list of terminology used in this series.

Iterative Attack: One or more extra attacks a character gains by virtue of a high base attack bonus when using the full attack action; see pages 22 and 143 in the *Player's Handbook.*

Light, One-Handed, and Two-Handed Weapons: A measure of just how much effort it takes to wield a weapon in combat.

A light weapon is small and handy enough to wield very easily in one hand -- even a creature's off hand (see below). Light weapons are particularly useful when fighting with a weapon in each hand. They're also convenient when you're grappling or otherwise restricted in your movements (such as when a big monster has swallowed you whole).

A one-handed weapon is small enough to wield in one hand, but not so easily wielded as a light weapon. A one-handed weapon is bigger than a light weapon and has sufficient length and heft to allow you to use both hands to wield it and possibly deal some extra damage with a successful hit (depending on your Strength score).

A two-handed weapon is simply too big to wield in one hand.

See page 113 in the *Player's Handbook* for a comprehensive discussion of weapon sizes.

Manufactured Weapon: An implement made for attacking in melee or ranged combat; improvised weapons (see page 113 in the *Player's Handbook*) also use the rules for manufactured weapons.

A manufactured weapon allows a combatant with a high base attack bonus to make iterativeattacks when using the full attack action.

Natural Weapon: An appendage or other body part (such as teeth or claws) that a creature can use to attack other creatures or objects. Natural weaponry can deal normal (lethal) damage without recourse to a class feature or feat, such as Improved Unarmed Strike. Creatures fighting with natural weapons do not gain iterativeattacks from a high base attack bonus when using the full attack action.

A creature could have fighting appendages that are not natural weapons. For example, a human's fists are not natural weapons. A human fighting with her fists is considered unarmed and she deals nonlethal damage with her attacks. A class feature or a feat such as Improved Unarmed Strike allows a human to function as though armed with a manufactured weapon.

Off Hand, Off-Hand Weapon: Any humanoid or biped with only two hands (or similar appendages) always has one hand that proves slightly less effective in combat. Attacks with the off hand take a -4 penalty on the attack roll (see page 311 in the *Player's Handbook*) and only half the character's Strength bonus (rounded down) applies to damage from the attack. Fighting with a weapon in each hand brings even bigger penalties.

When a character fights with a weapon in each hand, the weapon held in the off hand is called the off-hand weapon.

Primary Hand, Primary Weapon: A character's stronger and more dexterous hand. Attacks with the primary hand gain the character's full Strength bonus on damage rolls. When a character fights with two weapons, the weapon held in the primary hand is called the primary weapon. Attacks with a primary weapon in a two-weapon attack take a penalty on the attack roll because attacking with two weapons at once proves very tricky.

Two-Handed Fighting Basics

This series deals mainly with rules for humanoid characters with two arms and two legs who fight with manufactured weapons.

The rules offer characters wishing to fight with both hands three options as noted below:

From page 113 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Light, One-Handed, and Two-Handed Melee Weapons: This designation is a measure of how much effort it takes to wield a weapon in combat. It indicates whether a melee weapon, when wielded by a character of the weapon's size category, is considered a light weapon, a one-handed weapon, or a two-handed weapon.

Light: A light weapon is easier to use in one's off hand than a one-handed weapon is, and it can be used while grappling. A light weapon is used in one hand. Add the wielder's Strength bonus (if any) to damage rolls for melee attacks with a light weapon if it's used in the primary hand, or one-half the wielder's Strength bonus if it's used in the off hand. Using two hands to wield a light weapon gives no advantage on damage; the Strength bonus applies as though the weapon were held in the wielder's primary hand only.

An unarmed strike is always considered a light weapon.

One-Handed: A one-handed weapon can be used in either the primary hand or the off hand. Add the wielder's Strength bonus to damage rolls for melee attacks with a one-handed weapon if it's used in the primary hand, or 1/2 his or her Strength bonus if it's used in the off hand. If a one-handed weapon is wielded with two hands during melee combat, add 1-1/2 times the character's Strength bonus to damage rolls.

Two-Handed: Two hands are required to use a two-handed melee weapon effectively. Apply 1-1/2 times the character's Strength bonus to damage rolls for melee attacks with such a weapon.

- Using one weapon in two hands.

  When you wield a weapon big enough to use in two hands, you gain 1-1/2 times your Strength bonus on damage rolls from your attack. You can perform this trick with either a one-handed weapon or a two-handed weapon, but not with a light weapon (see page 113 in the *Player's Handbook*).

  This option usually prevents you from using a shield (more about that in Part Three) and that limits your Armor Class. It allows you to deal considerable damage with each hit, however, especially if you have a high Strength score.

  Other than the Armor Class hit, there aren't any real drawbacks to fighting with a weapon in both hands (though it's tough to do so while climbing a wall). Keep in mind, however, that fractions round down in the **D&D** game (see page 304 in the *Player's Handbook*). To get the most out of fighting with a weapon in two hands, you need a Strength score of at least 14 (+2 Strength bonus).

- Using a weapon in each hand.

  This option requires you to use two weapons, both of which you can wield in one hand (but read on). It's usually best to use a light weapon in your off hand, but not necessary. You can use an unarmed strike as either your primary or secondary weapon.

  When fighting with two weapons, you gain one extra attack with your off-hand weapon when you use the full attack action. If you have a high base attack bonus, you gain iterative attacks only with your primary weapon.

  When using a weapon in each hand, you usually can't use a shield, which hurts your Armor Class. In addition, you take an attack penalty on attacks you make with your primary hand and (generally) a bigger attack penalty for your off hand. The exact penalties depend on what feats you have and which two weapons you're using; see page 160 in the *Player's Handbook.* Parts Two and Three also examine two-weapon fighting in detail.

  You get your full Strength bonus on damage rolls for your primary weapon and half your Strength bonus on damage rolls with your off-hand weapon. Other damage bonuses or extra damage, such as from the Weapon Specialization feat or a class feature such as sneak attack, applies in full to both the primary and the off hand.

- Using a double weapon.

  Some weapons have two business ends. When you use both ends of a double weapon, you fight exactly as though you're wielding a one-handed weapon in your primary hand and a light weapon in your off hand -- think of a double weapon as having a primary end and an off-hand end. Most double weapons require an exotic weapon proficiency, but the extra investment can prove worthwhile; see Part Three.

What's Next?

That covers the basics. Next week, we'll consider two-weapon fighting in more detail.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon* Magazine for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual.* When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen

or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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